



Didactic Booklet

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Political Action

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INTRODUCTION

At the International Assembly of Santo Domingo in February 2005, group discussions generated several strong concepts : political action, consistency and trust. These three ideas were voted on unanimously as AIC's new paths, which will support our guidelines.

Political action was retained specifically as an implementation of the social co-responsibility guideline, voted in at the Nice Assembly of 2002.

Today, in some countries, the word "political" generates distrust and suspicion in the heads of Christians. The word is often understood in a pejorative manner, and not in its actual and noble meaning of "in the service of the common good of all citizens".

For us at AIC, political action means acting on public authorities, in order to establish situations that are legally, economically and politically fair, in which human rights are respected, women are not discriminated against, and in which people have the opportunity to get out of poverty and social exclusion, by themselves.

In this sense, AIC is a world network struggling against poverty and inequalities suffered by women. A network which is rooted, recognized and esteemed by major international institutions, such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the European Union and UNESCO. Within these organizations, and thanks to AIC representatives, ideas, proposals and actions by local groups in the field have a major influence on decision makers. That is why it is vitally important that information on the field work performed by grass root groups reaches representatives through continuous and fluid communication, since this is the opportunity to bring the cries of the poor to the ears of the powerful.

Concepts of charity and justice go hand in hand, and cannot be separated from the political dimension. Love for others is not efficient if we don't intend to modify the causes of the situations in which they are, whether

these situations are social, cultural, economical or political. St Vincent understood this and used all his influence at the French court in order to alleviate the fate of the poor.

The Church itself is very clear in its doctrine; remember the words of Pius XI : “The political domain is the most charitable domain. Political charity consists in an active and operating compromise, fruit of Christian love for others, considered as brothers, for a more fraternal and just world, with special attention to the need of the poorest”; and Benedict XVI just reminded us in his Encyclical letter “God is Love” : “the Catholic social doctrine does not want to give the Church power over the State... it wants to bring its contribution so that what is feared can be recognized here and now, as well as implemented “ (God is Love, no 28)

Examples found in this booklet show how AIC groups committed themselves, on the basis of field situations, to actions of sensitization of society and made culture change through the spreading of ideas of solidarity, justice and respect for human rights.

We really wish that this booklet will assist you in a concrete manner in the fight against poverties so as to transform injustice into hope, and build a world of peace.

Marina Costa

AIC International President

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In charge of strategic objective “Political Action”

I. AIC and Political Action

I. 1. What does AIC mean by political action?

“For AIC, political action means **ACTING** at the level of the various public institutions (locally, nationally and internationally) so as to cooperate in establishing fair situations, whether legally, economically or politically. It also means acting so that all human rights are respected, and that people are able to surmount poverty and social exclusion by themselves. The point is to transform unjust structures, to act upon decision makers in order to get them to act against poverty, to demand of them the implementation of existing laws, to identify weak points of implemented laws, to make practical proposals inspired by grass root work, to denounce inequality and abuse.

We EXERCISE our political arm each time an AIC group (whether local, national or international) launches actions, aimed at political authorities and within association networks, intending to identify the causes of poverties encountered in the field, to improve the lives of the poor, to obtain that women not be discriminated against, and to build venues for PEACE.

Consequently, for AIC, a political action is not an action to get into politics, but a humanitarian and social action, based on our Vincentian values and founded on our experience with the poor, action directed at authorities with deciding power. The purpose of these actions is to generate long term social changes in favor of the poor .

However we must understand that access to decision groups is easier in a democracy that works properly, but that there are governments where participation by civilian society is hard or even impossible or dangerous. Sometimes, in spite of these problems, it is possible to act locally, to cooperate with the Church, other associations or local representatives of international institutions such as UNICEF, UNESCO, PNUD...

For AIC associations that live in precarious societies, exchanges at international level and participation in international meetings are very important.

There are international NGOs such as “Transparency International” or “Amnesty International” which bear witness anonymously to human rights violations perpetrated by various governments.

In addition, we must be aware that AIC has the right to divulge bad situations and is asked by certain international bodies such as the Human Rights Commission or the European Council to send authentic and anonymous reports.

AIC groups which believe they can only act in their own countries or which need international support, can communicate to AIC International information on situations that violate Human Rights.

Here are some examples of political actions by AIC :

A political action by AIC at local level

“Midwives for the family” AIC Herne, Germany

A few years ago, the region of Nordrhein–Westfalen in Germany launched a pilot project : “Midwives for the family”. This project financed the accompaniment of mothers in difficult situations during pregnancy and for one year after birth.

The city of Herne, one of the poorest of the area, got involved in this project, and the accompaniment of 100 women was a real success. All mothers decided to continue with their pregnancies. Afterwards, most kept their babies at home; they were taught how to look after it, how to organize their household, their budget, and in some cases, how to find more suitable

housing. The women in charge of the project cooperated closely with the social aid services, with gynecologists and pediatricians, but also with AIC volunteers to identify these women in difficult situations, single, handicapped or very poor mothers, who often had already had one or more abortions, or who were already overwhelmed by several children, sometimes from different fathers.

Although a documentation of each case and a thorough evaluation have proved the success of the project in three years, the region stopped the financing and the city of Herne decided to give it up.

However neither the beneficiaries nor the people in charge of the project were ready to accept this decision. So they turned to the Office for Equality for Women, which contacted deputies at the local parliament, representatives of political parties and women's NGOs in the city, among which was AIC. During a first meeting the women in charge as well as two mothers/beneficiaries explained the situation. One of the mothers had a slight mental handicap and had been left alone with a premature baby, born with a heart malformation. She managed to communicate how the help she was receiving was indispensable to her, to learn to bring up her daughter whom she dearly loved and who was developing beautifully.

The decision by participants in this meeting was unanimous. The project had to be pursued and support these mothers and the women in charge. A work group was created right away.

Part of the group launched a project of sensitization of society. With the support of local radio and newspaper, it addressed the public at large, catholic and protestant parishes, NGOs, sports clubs, doctors, hospitals, entrepreneurs and shopkeepers. A printing shop financed flyers. There were several thousand signatures for the project (we at AIC collected them in our clubs for the elderly and for mothers).

Other members of the group got involved at a political level by starting lobbying actions directed at the mayor, the town treasurer and deputies. This action was supported by female deputies from all parties.

Three months later the project was put up for vote and passed with a good majority. It is still operating today, supported by Caritas which lends its secretariat and a room for free, and by CDZ/AIC volunteers who intensified their cooperation in the accompaniment and training of mothers.

A Political Action by AIC at National Level

Project against Hunger, AIC–Guadalajara (Mexico)

In Mexico poverty affects 60% of inhabitants. In the face of food wasting, which is recognized but unacceptable, a group of shopkeepers in Guadalajara and various civilian and religious organizations have set up an efficient system of redistribution of food that can not be sold, to poor people.

Thus was born the first **Food Bank of the Mexican Republic**.

Then 25 service associations, among which was AIC Guadalajara, participated in a campaign of sensitization of the people and public authorities. In order to fund the project, an annual event is run : **The Hunger Banquet**. For \$ 100 participants get to eat the meal that the country's poor eat : rice and beans, chili omelets and fresh water. This action had a major impact on the country. In November 1994, after 3 years of efforts, a law was passed : the **Law of Free Food in Jalisco** (state whose capital is Guadalajara).

Article 2 of the law stipulates that “wasting food products in industrial quantities is forbidden in Jalisco, whenever they could be given instead to private associations that have official status.”

This initiative led, on March 2005, to a federal agreement entitled “**Food Pact for a Hungerfree Mexico**”, signed by the President of the Mexican Republic. Today **51 food banks are at work in 29 of 31** Mexican states. According to the latest information bulletin, 51 000 tons of food were distributed to 600 000 needy people. This project reminds us of St Vincent’s active and combative spirituality and his political involvement in favor of the poor and the excluded. It is like a bridge between abundance and need, which binds the one who has too much to the one who has nothing.

From these two examples we can draw common points and define “the process of political action” according to AIC.

I.2. AIC’s Process for Political Action

1° Departure Point

A group of AIC volunteers identify a situation of poverty and potential changes.

2° Objective

Transformation of a situation of **great poverty**,

for ex : creation of a project or social service (clinic)

or **revising a legal decision**,

for ex : asylum right for a migrant family at local level

or **modifying or creating a law**,

for ex pressure actions at national level to create or improve laws related to violence against women.

3° Means to reach objective

- analyzing situation;
- knowing social policies and laws related to action;
- insuring active participation of beneficiaries;
- knowing how to present AIC;
- communicate our message properly : AIC, women and poverty;
- share working projects so they inspire decision-makers;
- organizing the work;
- creating and participating in networks which pursue same objectives;
- sensitizing the public at large and possibly integrating it into our action;
- get media support;
- knowing appropriate procedure and decision-makers to be contacted;
- taking part in meetings set up by decision-makers and generate them;
- preparing pressure action and lobbying;
- cooperating in follow-up on political action;
- informing the AIC secretariat of action and results.

II. Roots of AIC Political Action

II.1. “St Vincent’s political action”

On many occasions, St Vincent had to intervene in political issues in order to alleviate the poor’s sufferings. He became a public figure with great influence. During his life he was in contact with kings, queens, ministers, public authorities, noblemen, members of the highest church hierarchy, but also national and international figures. He called upon the powerful in order to be able to help the poorest. He knew that decisions made by the great affect the small. He took advantage of circumstances which enabled him to belong to the Council of Conscience of the Regent Queen Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV.

Moved by the misery he witnessed, he decided to ACT upon decision makers, because , just like today, political decisions cause hunger, wars and calamities.

In his time, much poverty in France was generated by the ambitious policies of its prime ministers, Cardinal Richelieu, and later Cardinal Mazarin.

He was never afraid to speak to the powerful. One day he even asked the Cardinal to resign, in the name of God, and for the good of the exhausted French people, because he was the first cause of so much suffering.

Another time, during the Fronde conflict, Paris was in a state of siege for 6 months by the royal army, which waited for famine to cause surrender. St Vincent witnessed such despair that he decided to ACT politically to avoid this humanitarian catastrophe. He tried to convince Queen Anne to give up such a cruel siege and to fire Cardinal Mazarin. Doing this, he risked his own life, because he could have been considered a traitor and executed.

St Vincent had no political allegiance, but it seemed that he sympathized with the “pious party” which tried to put a stop to wars in France and to launch a

program of national reconstruction in the ruined land.

St Vincent, as a priest, worked relentlessly to build PEACE. It is in this sense that he trained his priests. He prayed for Peace and acted for it. He even went to Rome to speak to Pope Innocent X in person about the political situation which made the French people live with the plague of wars.

He also intervened in the international politics of Cardinal Richelieu so that peace be declared in Lorraine and in Spain, and to make him fly to the assistance of Catholic Ireland invaded by Protestant England (the consequences of that invasion are still with us today).

On many occasions, and in the face of the terrible situation of prisoners turned into slaves by the Algiers authorities, he tried to act. He appealed for their liberation to a French admiral. Another time, he went to a high state employee so that the Congregation's missionaries be nominated chaplains of the French consuls in Tunis and Algiers, in order to better assist the prisoners.

Finally, the same Vincentian missionaries carried out the work of French consuls in Tunis and Algiers. This happened thanks to the Duchess of Aiguillon who had bought these functions and surrendered them to the priests of the Congregation.

When we look at his actions, we see that St Vincent :

- tackled causes that produced poverty;
- never took sides in political rivalries; but that did not mean he did not intervene;
- when justice, charity and compassion for the poor's suffering demanded it, "his personal vocation of evangelization of the poor, and nothing else, made him intervene in affairs of a political nature" (P. Corera, St Vincent's biographer);
- he practiced Christian charity as well as a strong social conscience.

Like St Vincent, today's real Christian charity must be social, opt for justice and operate in economical, political and cultural fields that make up society.

In the XVIIth century, people thought that socio-political structures were practically untouchable. But today we have the opportunity to put into place another social and political order, so that the social empowerment of the poor and the defense of their rights become possible.

St Vincent labored so that the authorities of his time would understand that charity work must come from authorities. He sensitized politicians to their moral duty toward the poor. Thus he was able to found and operate hospitals with public monies.

The expression "public good" comes from St Vincent. He wrote it himself very often, since he was very preoccupied by the good of social groups (prisoners, children, war refugees, etc.)

On the tracks of St Vincent, the Vincentian Christian must meet the individual needs of the poor, our brothers in Jesus Christ, and at the same time, in the light of gospel principles, he must try to reform social structures that are unjust, so as not to perpetuate or hide the causes of poverty. This means we have to have "a charitable heart together with a social conscience". (P. Corera, C.M.)

Finally we can say that St Vincent de Paul was not a politician, but a Saint with all the qualities of a statesman.

II.2. AIC Guidelines and Political Action

Our motto “fighting against poverties and their causes” has brought us a long way, and when we look back, we understand the different stages that AIC has gone through :

- from assistance to participation
- from promotion to self-promotion
- from a culture of solidarity to empowerment
- from actions of denunciation and pressure on structures to transformation of the poor and of society
- from institution reinforcement to social co-responsibility and networking.

Today our guidelines are

- social co-responsibility
- empowerment
- institutional reinforcement.

From social co-responsibility to political action

At our assembly of Santo Domingo in 2005, the Superior General of the Lazarists reminded us, in our presentation, that : “AIC has come a long way in understanding charity, going from a “paternalistic” or “maternalistic” attitude to charity seen as a liberating and transforming force for our “lords and masters”.

We are called upon to start actions, especially **political actions**, to eradicate the causes of poverty and unite in solidarity for justice in favor of the poor, because unjust systems created by the selfish hearts of men have caused social, political and economical poverty” (Father Gregory ASD 2005)

Co-responsibility commits us to political actions which propose a social and

political order respectful of dignity and rights of all and especially the poorest, and which contribute to the search for common good.

To be credible, our actions must be anchored in concrete situations of poverty, as we meet them in our AIC projects. Then we can promote actions of pressure and cooperation on major scales, in order to influence structures, be it families, society, church, up to large international organizations. Our guidelines address a political and social challenge.

II. 3. The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church

Bring the Good News to the Poor

AIC statutes refer to it, we mention it in our Guidelines, it is the basis of our actions and the major motor which incites us to transform injustice into justice, but do we actually know the Church's Social Doctrine?

Social Doctrine refers to the collection of texts by the Catholic Church which define the Church's position in social matters. Doctrine is actually nothing more than an interpretation of the bible as regards the social and political actions of members of the Catholic Church. It originates in the Popes' reflections, bishops' conferences, scholars, specialized institutions but also words of Saints and especially the words and action of Christians involved in the social scene.

It is thought that the founding text is the Rerum Novarum Encyclical (new things) issued by Pope Leon XIII (1891) responding to the burning issues generated by industrialization in the 19th century. It does not observe a status quo, but it gives critical guidelines directed toward social action and developing community structures.

Through Social Doctrine "the Church does not offer economical or political programs or systems. But it is "expert in humanity" and that inevitably causes it to extend its religious mission to the various fields where men and women exert their activities in search of happiness, which is always relative,

but is possible on this earth, in accordance with human dignity” *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987.

By developing a social doctrine, the Church invites Christians to fight against evils that disfigure men and the causes of these evils, because there is no charity without justice. Charity goes beyond justice but justice is an essential condition. Justice is charitable and social at the same time. Its objective is not only to assist the poor but also to build a world in which all men can live a totally human life.

Social Doctrine relates people to society in the light of the Gospel. Christians can find in the social doctrine of the Church principles of reflection, criteria for judgment and action guidelines which will enable them to interpret today’s realities and search for appropriate paths to action.

Social Doctrine is based on natural law, which is defined by the Ten Commandments and ethical rules of people through cultures and religions. It posits the moral foundation necessary to build the community of men (*catechism of the Catholic Church* 1960).

Based on natural law, the permanent principles of the Church’s Social Doctrine constitute the real foundation of Catholic social teachings. These principles are as follows : human dignity, on which all other principles and the contents of Social Doctrine depend, the common good, participation, solidarity, fundamental values of social life and charity.

These principles constitute reference parameters for the interpretation and evaluation of social phenomena. They provide judgment criteria that are always updated for carrying out social actions in all fields : work, family, economic life, political community, international community, environment and promotion of peace.

Social Doctrine defines pastoral action in the social field and lay people’s commitment, by launching an appeal directed at building a “civilization of love”.

Key words

Principle of human dignity: *“since every human face reflects something of the glory of God, human dignity in front of God is the foundation of human dignity in front of other men”* (Gaudium et Spes, 1966)

Principle of the common good: *“All social conditions which enable groups as well as each member to reach their perfection in a more thorough and easy way. Therefore it demands respect and promotion of people and their fundamental rights”* (Gaudium et spes, 1966)

Principle of subsidiarity: it is a social and political motto according to which individual responsibility and liberty have priority over the intervention of and resort to the State. On the contrary, problems which exceed the capabilities of a small entity must be entrusted to the next level supporting it (“subsidiare” as in original Latin word). This principle, also called “help principle”, states that it is an error in morals and charity to allow deeds at too high a level, when they can be done at the lower one, because the lower would get deprived of what it can do. Originating in the Catholic Church social doctrine, this principle is one of the central principles of the European Union.

Principle of participation *“the typical consequence of subsidiarity which expresses itself, essentially, in a series of activities through which citizen, as individuals or with others, contribute to the political, social, cultural and economical life of the civilian community to which they belong”* (Gaudium et Spes, 1966) *“Participation is a duty that all must consciously exert, in a responsible manner and towards the common good”*- (Catechism of the

Catholic Church). In this perspective, it becomes unavoidable to encourage participation, especially by the most disadvantaged.

Principle of solidarity *“This is not a superficial and vague feeling of compassion or sorrow caused by the sufferings of people close or far away. On the contrary, it is the firm and consistent determination to work for the common good, that is, the good of each and all. Such determination is founded on the firm conviction that integral development is thwarted by greed for profit and hunger for power. These sinful attitudes and structures cannot be vanquished – with divine help – except through a totally opposed attitude : work for the good of others while being ready, in the gospel sense, to be lost for others rather than exploiting them, and serving them instead of oppressing them for one’s own profit“* (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 1987)

Social Doctrine, beyond the principles that must govern a society worthy of men, also mentions fundamental values. All social values are integral to human dignity, whose genuine development they favor; essentially they are : truth, liberty, justice and love” (Catechism of the Catholic Church) These values constitute pillars which ensure solidity and consistency to the building of life and action; they are values that determine the quality of all social actions and institutions.

Charity: *There is a strong link between social values and charity; this link must be forever strengthened. Only charity can move and shape social action in the direction of peace, in the context of an ever more complex world. To achieve this, we must do what it takes so that charity appears not only as the inspirer of an individual action, but also a force able to generate new paths to face today’s problems, and to renew from the interior structures, social organizations, legal norms. In this prospective, charity*

becomes social and political charity. The work of mercy which makes us meet a real need of our brothers is undeniably an act of charity; however the commitment which organizes and structures society so that our brothers don't experience poverty is an act of charity just as indispensable. (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church).

With this synthetic introduction we would like to invite you to study the texts of the Social Doctrine in order to discover its riches and to direct your actions with its principles, which St Vincent had already adopted.

We invite you to start with a reflection on a principle which is familiar to you, such as solidarity : discuss it among yourselves, find its sources in the Gospel, invite specialists and check the Internet.

The first objective of this introduction is to encourage you and motivate you to political action, in the words of the Sollicitudo Rei Socialis encyclical “The obligation to devote ourselves to the development of people is an imperative for us and every man and woman”.

Reference Texts

You will find on the Vatican site all the major texts which influenced the social doctrine of the Catholic Church (www.vatican.va)

- Compendium of the Church's Social Doctrine, Jean-Charles Descubes, Renato Raffaele Martino, Angelo Sodano. Pontifical Council “Justice and Peace”, 2004. Cerf ISBN 2204078875
- Ten Foundation Principles of the Social Teaching of the Church : Father Robert P. Maloney, C.M., Paris March 1999.
- Catholic Social Teaching – A Way In : Stratford Caldecott, 2001.

III. How to develop a political action

III. 1. Knowing how to present AIC : learning to “draw the right cards”

Political action implies meeting with local, national or international decision-makers; it is important to know how to present our association.

Here are basic principles to generate interest, so as to be heard or read :

Put yourself in the interviewee's shoes and ask yourself : *What interests him/her?* And always have a concrete example to give.

According to the answer, chose among essential elements, because you cannot speak about everything. AIC is :

Identity

- The International Association of Charities
- An international association
- An NGO, non-governmental organization
- An OIC, Catholic international organization.

Composition

- A network of national associations from 52 countries
- 200 000 volunteers, mostly women

Objective

- Fighting women's poverty from the basis of needs identified in the field
- through empowerment, co-responsibility and networking.

Actions

- 18 million volunteer hours per year
- Among others : 1125 projects of promotion of women
- 450 projects involving income generating activities
- 525 projects involving education and training

History

- St Vincent de Paul founded the first group in France in 1617...

Concrete example

- In our city we opened a nutritional center for very poor women, who come 3 times a week to learn to better feed their children.

LET'S TRY!

When there is little time

AIC is present in 50 countries, includes 200 000 volunteer women who fight poverty with the poorest women on earth.

In a religious venue or one that is friendly to us

AIC is faithful to the mission entrusted to it by St Vincent de Paul, its founder, in 1617; its aim is to fight together against all forms of poverty, whether they be economical, social, spiritual; for example, in our country we...

For more general information

AIC is made up of volunteer women, from all social backgrounds, who fight poverty, especially women's poverty.

What is interesting is that, while comprising 50 national associations in various continents, it has managed to create an AIC identity through sharing skills and cultures, solidarity, building a real network.

It is an international NGO, which means that it is represented in various intergovernmental organizations, where it relays the voice of the poor. It is also in contact with international thinking which incites it to evolve.

AIC has very varied actions, since they always are responses to needs identified in the field; with women and families, for example, it leads 1125 promotion actions, and in our country (or city) we have recently conducted a very innovative action...

For a local or nation decision maker

AIC is present in 50 countries where it fights poverty. In our country we have this type of project, which was started on the basis of needs identified in the field by poor women themselves. The objective of our association is the empowerment of women, mainly through training and long term accompaniment. AIC already had contacts with such ministry (administration)...

For country representative to an international organization

AIC is present in 50 countries where it fights poverty. In your country, I know of this type of project which was based on needs identified in the field by the women themselves. Its objective is the empowerment of women, mainly through training and long term accompaniment. I know that AIC had contacts with such ministry (administration)...

With the representative of an intergovernmental organization

AIC is present in 50 countries. Its objective is fighting against women's poverty, on the basis of needs identified in the field. It is represented at ECOSOC, UNESCO, at the Council of Europe... AIC is up to date with the objectives of your organization : for example, in the field of education/training, we have 525 projects; we also have projects in the fields of cultural identity, women's empowerment and community development. Moreover AIC was represented at such and such symposium or was financed by such and such organization.

AND OF COURSE ALWAYS HAVE WITH YOU :

- calling cards
- brochure or short written presentation by the national and/or local association (President, people in charge, headquarters, account number, number of groups and volunteers, projects, founding date...)
- an important or innovative project, possibly with photos.
- brochure and/or report of AIC International.

III.2. Know the law of your country

In our AIC projects, when there is a poverty situation, volunteers and beneficiaries try to identify the situation, define the desirable goals together and, if necessary, participate together in selected actions.

In addition, it is necessary for volunteers to get information about and know the local political authorities where decisions are made, in order to change the unjust situation (mayors, regional councils, etc).

It is really important that we penetrate these political bodies so that our practical proposals, based on our field work, be adopted in those decision places. Indeed, politicians do not work in the field, they only know realities through other people. Volunteers are the people who know the reality of poverty. Volunteers must denounce... propose... watch....

If volunteers don't have the possibility to penetrate those decision groups, because sometimes it is not feasible, they should present working projects to the people in charge of social services, or inaugurate a new center and invite authorities, or get the press to write an article on their work. Those are good ways to make contact with decision makers and exert an influence.

Volunteers must have presentation materials for AIC and their national associations (bulletins, reports, photographs, fliers etc). This will facilitate their work in public organizations and networks.

In order for volunteers to exert their political actions efficiently, they must be well trained and well informed. They must do research and know the laws of their countries and current social policies. In addition they must be aware of laws which, in other countries, have contributed to transforming unjust situations and social discrimination, to fight for the needs of the poor and prevent violence and ill-treatments.

Volunteers are the people who know the reality of poverty. Volunteers must denounce... propose... watch....

A good knowledge of laws and social policies in their countries will enable volunteer to be better prepared for :

- transforming unjust structures;
- inform the poor of their rights;
- denounce cases of abuse;
- defend the right of the poor, with the poor;
- put pressure on decision makers;
- demand the implementation of existing laws;
- watch over public institutions;
- facilitate the empowerment of volunteers and beneficiaries;
- know current legal shortages and know where laws are insufficient;
- know whether there is a gender bias in their countries' laws and social policies.

An example from AIC Peru on the importance for volunteers to know laws

A few years ago in Peru, a law was voted to enable the elderly, the handicapped, pregnant women and women with babies to avoid standing in line in the various public administrations. As often happens, the law was not applied. A group of Vincentian volunteers made several photocopies of the law and gave them to the elderly with whom they worked, so that they had proof and would be able to demand their right to get immediate service. The piece of paper gave them the necessary confidence. Today, there are special booths for these people in all administrations. How incredible that something as simple as knowing the law and providing copies of it, was so helpful to so many older people!

Therefore it is necessary to know existing laws, but we must also analyze which rights are not included in those laws, because this absence generates unjust situations and many types of poverty. We will then be able to go further, and use pressure so that laws that fill this vacuum be passed. In addition, it can be useful to know laws in other countries, which have contributed to transforming unjust situation and social discrimination, fighting for the needs of the poor, and preventing violence and abuse. For all these goals, the AIC network is very useful.

III. 3. Networking with other associations

We often are not able to lead a political action with our AIC strength only. It is thus important to sensitize those who can work with us : other institutions, local governments, NGOs which defend the same causes, as many bodies and people as possible, knowing that the more people are involved, the better. Indeed networking makes the work easier, and the quality go up. There are exchanges of experiences. Many doors open, our target scope is wider, and when the time comes to exert pressure, our voices have better chances to be heard by public authorities.

We know this through experience : when faced with poverty, we usually start in the private sector, sensitizing those around us, then we unite with others by networking. It is only after this stage, when we are in a network, that we can put pressure on and reach the public sector. Indeed it is very difficult to start with the public domain.

Thus, to take political action more easily, we search for other partners who have the same objective as we do. It may be other associations, the local church, the media, local or regional governments, ministries, civilian society, etc. In other words, we create or participate in NETWORKS.

We know how hard it is in today's world to defend our rights and others'

individually. For this reason we must unite with other entities that pursue the same goals. We are stronger when we unite, and we are more likely to be heard and to convince others.

It is good to network because together we shall overcome obstacles, save time, be able to share problems and think together about more varied and elaborate solutions. NETWORKING is a strength which can change situations of poverty.

We must locate already functioning networks in our community or our country.

A few cautionary words about creating a NETWORK or participating in one :

A NETWORK is a group of institutions or entities which share objectives and coordinate to act together and implement a common project.

An indispensable condition for networking is to know ourselves as AIC and know our objectives.

Before entering a network, we must study its statutes, if there are any, and its objectives.

Objectives must be clear and known to all members of the network.

No organization or entity must lose its autonomy, be subordinate to others, and there must be no dependence whatsoever.

It will be mutual support and learning each one's limits and possibilities.

We must think of what we expect from the network.

Defining cooperation and contribution of each organization must be clearly defined.

Information must be shared.

If we join a network, we must evaluate the impact of common actions.

(the bigger the network, the larger the results of its actions)

The network will have to operate in a democratic way, based on consensus, respect, trust and transparency in the handling of funds.

To reinforce the network, each one must regularly write an evaluation (we can suggest the FODA analysis for the network itself and each of its components).

Examples of cooperation and networking in AIC groups ;

In AIC Spain, volunteers in Barbate (Cadiz) and the organization “Manos Unidas (Joined Hands) with which they cooperate, addressed the Spanish government together, to request 0.7% of the GNP for aid to development of the poorest countries and the forgiveness of their debts.

At AIC Ecuador, the Guayaquil volunteers operate in networks. It all started when, in 2004, the town suggested to those who worked with the elderly (Church, public and private institutions, foundations, NGOs, etc) to unite and work together. All of them had advice from professional consultants. Beneficiaries from various institutions were invited. They were asked what their needs and requests were. After a long process and analysis of what the elderly required, the Regional Plan for the Elderly was launched, with the motto “Let us build a city for all”. Vincentian volunteers are now part of this large network for the elderly, which develops communication strategies to enhance appreciation and respect for older people. This network also works at family integration, improving health in general, generating and obtaining funds. Currently the Vincentian volunteers are working with very poor women, most of which are illiterate. Belonging to that networks opened doors that enable volunteers to develop, advance and improve the quality of their work.

These examples clearly show that , when we are united to other organizations, we do things more easily, such as :

- sensitizing citizens and governments,
- transform poverty situations,
- participate in lobbying,
- exert social pressure,
- participate as citizens (gather signatures, march, campaign, Women's day, 25th November, etc).



Let us not forget that AIC is a network per se, which works against poverty and social exclusion, and which is present in 50 countries in the world. AIC belongs to the Vincentian family, with its various branches.

AIC belongs to various international networks (see interview of representatives).

Let us listen to Pope Benedict XVI in his latest Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est” (God is Love).

(28) “The Church cannot and must not initiate by itself the political objective of making a society as just as possible. It cannot and must not take the place of the State. But neither can it or must it stay in the margin of the fight for justice.”

(29) “Although expressions of church charity must never be confused with State activity, it still remains that charity must govern the whole existence of lay people, and therefore, their political activity, as “social charity”.

III.4. Participating in Sensitization Campaigns

Political action can also take the form of pressure campaign, through petitions or marches.

If we respond personally, as citizens, we are free of our choices; but as soon as we respond in the name of AIC, some precautions are called for – which are related to those mentioned in joining a network above.

Is our local or national AIC (according to the level of need) in agreement?

Is the objective of the petition or march the improvement of a poverty situation that we meet in the field, and thus well informed on?

Otherwise for what reason do we want to get involved?

What concrete proposal has been put forward?

What are our current priorities? Do we have enough volunteers to get involved in this new commitment?

Do we know the group or people who started the process? Do we share their objectives?

Example of Sensitization Campaign at AIC U.K.

Following a visit by the Father General, the AIC England group joined with the Vincentian family to work together in poor neighborhoods, to develop their common spirituality and work for more justice; coordination is ensured by a Daughter of Charity.

See www.vmp.org.uk

Stop trafficking in human beings : in December 2005 the European Union approved unanimously an action plan to combat human trafficking. The UK joined in. As member of the Catholic Commission “Justice and Peace”, we participate with the Vincentian Family to this campaign.

May this phrase of St Vincent help us when we think about the appropriateness of tackling a political action : *“not only do good, but do it well”*.

**Participating
in
sensitization
campaigns.**



III.5. Using the Millennium Goals for Development (MGD)

The Millennium Goals for Development (MGD) and related targets, are based on the Millennium Declaration signed by 189 countries, of whom 147 were represented by their Heads of State, in September 2000

(www.u.org/french/documents/ga/res/a55r002f.pdf – A/RES/55/2).

Objectives and targets are interdependent and must be considered as a whole. They represent a partnership between developing and developed countries, which are all determined, as stated in the Millennium Declaration, to “create – at national as well as world levels – a climate favoring development and elimination of poverty”.

And why are MGDs important for us, AIC volunteers?

MGDs are not declarations of intent but constitute concrete rights, for example rights to education.

For the first time, heads of state agreed to their implementation by a certain date – 2015.

Not only **Objective 3** but all objectives related to **women** who represent 70% of poor people, and the proportion is growing, as they are underprivileged in the domains of education, jobs, leadership, medical treatment and sometimes even food. In so far as they are responsible for their families, women suffer more from degrading environments, droughts and lack of drinking water. They have less access to modern means of communication and international markets (**Objective 8**).

All objectives respond to a kind of poverty we encounter every day where we live – hunger, AIDS, inequalities between genders in the eyes of the law.

But what can we do to implement the MGDs?

With MGDs governments voted on a list of concrete targets and measurable indicators, as criteria for an annual evaluation requested from governments

by the UN – published on the internet (if you can't find it, AIC's Representation Service can help you in your research).

If your government, according to your knowledge, does not commit itself to the implementation of one, several or all of the targets and/or does not make a sincere evaluation, you should :

check if your experiences can be generalized

if so, unite with your partners (Vincentian family, NGOs, Churches)

commit with them to pressure actions so that your government implement what it signed

show your commitment through exemplary projects

It is better to concentrate on one target at the time; AIC chose all that is related to women.

Here is an example

According to your experiences, the government is not taking any step to improve the health of mothers. You gather information from doctors, other NGOs etc, and with specialists, you design a program to improve the situation, for example by creating clinics in rural areas, free access for poor women, better training of staff, training of mothers and girls. To set up this program you look for partners, especially national women's NGOs but also international organizations such as UNIFEM. With them you send written communication to the relevant ministry, you launch a sensitization campaign, particularly directed at female representatives, the public, the media, etc, insisting always that this objective has been signed by your government.

Your involvement in a program of mothers/girls' training show that you are ready to cooperate in the implementation of this important objective.

During the NGO Conference in New York, the UN Secretary General launched a moving appeal to civilian society and NGOs in order to reinforce their commitment to the implementation of MDGs by and with governments. How do we answer this appeal?

Questions for group work :

- *Do volunteers in our group know the MDGs?*
- *What poverty and deficits mentioned by MDGs do we meet in the field?*
- *Through what projects do we respond to these poverties and deficits? According to our experiences, what does our government do to reach the said goals?*
- *Do we know the relevant programs, decisions and laws?*
- *Is there a target that is particularly important for us?*
- *How can we contribute to its implementation?*



*Anne Sturm and Rose de Lima Ramanankavana in New York
attending UN Conference*

Millennium Development Goals

Goals and Targets	Indicators for Follow-up
Objective 1: Eliminating extreme poverty and hunger	
<p>Target 1: Reduce by half, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of population whose income is less than 1 \$ a day.</p> <p>Target 2: Reduce by half, between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of population suffering</p>	<p>1. Proportion of population with less than 1 \$ a day.</p> <p>4. Percentage of children younger than 5 with low weight.</p> <p>5. Proportion of population not getting minimum calories.</p>
Objective 2: Guarantee elementary education to all	
<p>Target 3: by 2015, give all children, boys and girls, all over the world, the means to complete primary education.</p>	<p>6. Net rate of schooling at elementary level.</p> <p>8. Literacy rate for the 15 to 24 group.</p>
Objective 3: Promote equality of genders and empowerment of women	
<p>Target 4: eliminating disparities between genders in elementary and secondary education by 2005 if possible and at all levels of education by 2015 at latest.</p>	<p>10. Literacy rate of women 15 to 24 compared to men.</p> <p>11. Percentage of salaried women.</p> <p>12. Proportion of parliament seats occupied by women.</p>
Objective 5: improving mothers' health	
<p>Target 6: Reduce by 3/4, between 1990 and 2015 the rate of childbirth deaths</p>	<p>16. Childbirth deaths</p> <p>17. Proportion of childbirths with qualified medical person in attendance.</p>
Objective 6: Fight AIDS/HIV, malaria and others	
Objective 7: Guarantee long term environment	
Objective 8. Set up world partnership for development.	

III.6. AIC Political Action at International Level

Interview of Representatives

You are an AIC representative, what kind of work do you do?

Each of us represents AIC within a specific organization (see next page); these international entities are made up of government or Church representatives and government agents.

Each has its special competence, from whom flow the current themes. Right now, the MDGs are a common concern, especially in so far as fighting poverty.

There are work groups which, in tight union with these entities, gather together NGOs; that is where we come in.

Within these groups, we always use field experiences as a basis for our thinking.

Have you ever presented AIC projects ?

Yes, at round tables, we suggested listening to AIC witnesses.

Can You Give Us Some Examples?

- In 2002, Uca de G. made a presentation at Unesco on the MUAVI project : women and violence in Mexico.
- In 2004, Rose R. participated in round tables at ECOSOC and Unesco on responsible fatherhood, a project directed at Madagascar men.
- In 2005, Maritchu R. and Anna R. intervened at the Council of Europe and presented the Milan project on the integration of Arabic women through culture, as well as actions led by AIC Spain, in cooperation with Doctors without Borders, in Ceuta and Mellila.
- Cruz Maria de Leon was able to speak at ECOSOC about the poverty as violence against women, and more recently, in December, Anne S.

AIC Representations

1) as NGO (Non Governmental Organization)

New York

- **ECOSOC:** Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, Subcommittee for the eradication of poverty : *Madeleine Morrissey*.
- **DPI/NGO:** UN Liaison Committee: *Madeleine Morrissey*.

Geneva

- **The Commission of Human Rights of the UN :** *Ida Tomachu Soldini*

Paris

- **UNESCO, UN Agency for Education, Science, Culture and Communication:** Program Commission, Fight against Poverty, Dialogue between Cultures, Education for All, Education for Sustained Development in Urban Environment, Human Rights : *Veronique Vilaseca, Alette de Maredsous, Marie des Neiges Meis, Christine Desveaux, Solange Choppin de Janvry*.

Strasbourg

- **The Council of Europe:** Executive Committee for Childhood and Family, Parliamentary Commission for Family and Social Affairs, Group “Great Poverty and Social Cohesion” (presidency), Dialogue and North-South Solidarity: *Maritchu Rall*.

Brussels

- **EAPN,** European Network for Fighting Poverty : *Christine Desveaux*.

2) as ICO (International Catholic Organization)

Rome

- **Pontifical Council Cor UNUM:** “The Council expresses the concern of the Catholic Church for needy people, so as to encourage human brotherhood and to express the charity of Christ”: *Anne Sturm*
- **ICO Conference:** *Anne Sturm*
- The Catholic Centers in Geneva (UN), Paris (UNESCO), New York (ECOSOC) and the union of Catholic NGOs in Strasbourg (European Council)
- Crescendo Network : *Francoise Gaudemar*

spoke at UNESCO about a micro-credit project in the Philippines.

“And every year, on October 17th, World Day of Poverty Rejection, Maritchu R. organizes on the front steps of the Council of Europe a demonstration in cooperation with poor families (most of these events were written on in AIC-Info).

Can AIC volunteers help you in your work?

Without doubt : we expect to hear about field experiences, carried out for the last 2 or 3 years, presented “as projects”, according to AIC methods, with a follow-up evaluation.

We also need examples of “political actions” that you might have led, at local or national levels.

(You can send them by Email to Anne Sturm, who is in charge of representatives, and on paper to the project service of the secretariat. Anne.sturm@cityweb.de and Service.project@aic-international.org)

We are also awaiting responses to the questionnaires sent by AIC, as requested by representatives.

The NGOs that work with these international organizations are often requested to give their opinions, either collectively, or individually on the occasion of round tables or conferences; have you ever influenced the final text?

Yes it has happened that an AIC idea was put in a text. It happened in 2005 for the statement of the UN Secretary General about violence to women, in which Solange C. had requested that the role of media in prevention of violence to women be mentioned.

At the Forum on Migrants Integration organized by the Council in Europe in Messina in November 2005, AIC wrote a recommendation to take into account the situation of migrant women.

And again, for the “Program and Budget of UNESCO 2005–2007. in which

Anne S. asked to mention “informal training”. It is on this new budget line that part of the 2005 ASD in Santo Domingo was financed.

We also occasionally make an AIC specific statement at plenary sessions (Geneva 2000, Summit of Social Development + 5)

We put forward AIC ideas, such as :

- our good practices, such as accompaniment long term of people having difficulties
- our guidelines : co-responsibility, empowerment, networking
- and of course our priority “**women and poverty**”

The spiritual dimension of our action influences, of course, the AIC positions; it is particularly striking in terms of family values and attention to the poorest

What do you bring back to AIC out of all those exchanges?

We are in contact with NGO representatives from the whole world, from whom we get exchanges of experiences, which can give us ideas... or acquaint us with other NGOs which do the same work we do, sometimes in the same place. We send to the president the themes and major directions of the organizations and the thoughts that derive thereof, as they relate to our actions, such as :

- millennium objectives
- creation of an environment favorable to women
- women’s leadershipmicro-credit

This enables us to direct our actions and participate in the transformation of society.

What is your conclusion?

What enables us to move forward is the commitment of our volunteers to the poor and our will to act together to defeat poverty. With AIC, we feel that we have a mandate from the poor : they must remain at the core of debates

by international policies, and that AIC exerts a political action at international level, regarding the improvement of their living conditions, so long as they are not able to do it themselves.

Conclusion

Before ending this brochure, we want to thank those who participate in its creation through thinking, sending examples, writing, translating, setting up and sending!

We have seen how and why we can act, with decision makers, to change poverty and injustice situations; these “political actions” taken in groups and in the name of AIC have particular weight because they are based on concrete poverty situations, for which we suggest improvements, if possible with the beneficiaries.

However each of us, loyal to her Vincentian convictions, can get involved personally, as a citizen :

- expressing her vote to ensure a fair and social policy, open to the expectations of the poorest
- by participating in the political life in the service of the community (mayor, community trustee...)
- through getting more involved in social services to the poor
- by enabling everyone to participate in the political debate, through access to information and a certain level of education.

Is that a dream or a path?

AIC
Association International of Charities

A mainly women's association organized
at world level, including more
than 250 000 volunteers
in 6000 local teams in 50 countries.

Founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617
to fight any forms of poverty and
injustice and to give women an active
social and recognized role
in a spirit of solidarity.

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